

**CLAIMS:**

What is claimed is:

1. A method for assigning a role to a computing device in a network data processing  
5 system, the method comprising:  
    providing at least a first physical object, wherein the first physical object includes  
    at least one visible characteristic, wherein the first physical object has role information  
    associated therewith, and wherein the at least one visible characteristic is indicative of at  
    least a first role associated with the first physical object;  
10      placing at least the first physical object in a physical relationship with a first  
    computing device;  
    associating the first computing device with the first physical object;  
    receiving, by the first computing device, the role information from the first  
    physical object; and  
15      responsive to the role information being received, assigning the first role to the  
    first computing device based on the role information.
2. The method of claim 1, wherein receiving the role information from the physical  
20 object includes communicating with the physical object through a communications  
    adapter.
3. The method of claim 2, wherein the communications adapter is one of a wireless  
communications adapter and a wired communications adapter.
- 25 4. The method of claim 2, wherein the communications adapter is one of a universal  
serial bus adapter, a Bluetooth communications adapter, a wireless adapter using 802.11b  
communications standard, and a wired Ethernet adapter.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein receiving the role information from the first physical object includes identifying the at least one visible characteristic of the physical object.
- 5 6. The method of claim 5, wherein the at least one visible characteristic includes one of a shape, a color, writing, and visible markings.
7. The method of claim 1, wherein placing at least the first physical object in a physical relationship with the first computing device includes affixing the first physical object to the first computing device using an adhesive.
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8. The method of claim 1, wherein placing at least the first physical object in a physical relationship with the first computing device includes placing the first physical object within a given distance from the first computing device.
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9. The method of claim 1, wherein the first physical object is a container and wherein placing at least the first physical object in a physical relationship with the first computing device includes placing the first computing device within the first physical object.
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10. The method of claim 9, wherein the container is a computer shelving unit.
11. The method of claim 1, wherein the first physical object is a second computing device and wherein receiving the role information from the first physical object includes identifying a role of the second computing device.
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12. The method of claim 1, wherein the first physical object includes a data storage unit and wherein the role information is stored in the data storage unit.
13. The method of claim 12, wherein the role information is encoded in extensible  
5 markup language.
14. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
providing one or more configuration files to the first computing device to perform  
the first role.  
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15. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
providing one or more software programs to the first computing device to perform  
the first role.
- 15 16. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
associating the first computing device with a second physical object;  
receiving, by the first computing device, role information from the second  
physical object; and  
responsive to role information being received from the second physical object,  
20 assigning a second role to the first computing device based on the role information  
received from the second physical object.
17. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
removing the first physical object such that the first physical object is no longer in  
25 a physical relationship with the first computing device;  
disassociating the first computing device from the first physical object; and  
removing the first role from the first computing device.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein removing the first role from the first computing device includes removing the first role from the first computing device after a predetermined period of time expires.
- 5 19. The method of claim 17, wherein removing the first role from the first computing device includes removing the first role from the first computing device responsive to a second physical object being placed in a physical relationship with the first computing device.
- 10 20. The method of claim 17, wherein removing the first role from the first computing device includes:  
completing all units of work begun while the first role was assigned to the first computing device.
- 15 21. The method of claim 17, wherein removing the first role from the first computing device includes:  
passing at least one unit of work begun while the first role was assigned to the first computing device to a second computing device.
- 20 22. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
assigning a seniority level to the first computing device, wherein the first computing device has a more senior role than at least one other computing device.
23. The method of claim 22, wherein assigning a seniority level includes assigning  
25 the seniority level based on the role information.

24. The method of claim 22, wherein assigning a seniority level includes assigning the seniority level based upon a physical location of the first computing device relative to the at least one other computing device.
- 5 25. The method of claim 1, wherein the first physical object includes an output device.
26. The method of claim 25, further comprising:  
altering the at least one visible characteristic using the output device.
- 10 27. The method of claim 25, further comprising:  
receiving, by the first physical object, status information from the first computing device; and  
presenting an indication of the status information using the output device.
- 15 28. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
receiving, by an operator, instructions for assigning roles; and  
modifying, by the operator, the physical relationships between physical objects and computing devices according to the instructions.
- 20 29. The method of claim 1, wherein the first computing device assigns at least one role to at least one other computing device based on the role information.
- 25 30. A system for assigning a role to a computing device in a network data processing system, the system comprising:  
at least a first computing device;

at least a first physical object, wherein the first physical object includes at least one visible characteristic, wherein the first physical object has role information associated therewith, wherein the at least one visible characteristic is indicative of at least a first role associated with the first physical object, and wherein at least the first physical object is  
5 placed in a physical relationship with at least the first computing device;

association means for associating the first computing device with the first physical object;

receipt means for receiving, by the first computing device, the role information from the first physical object; and

10 role assignment means, responsive to the role information being received, for assigning the first role to the first computing device based on the role information.

31. The system of claim 30, wherein the receipt means includes communication means for communicating with the physical object through a communications adapter.

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32. The system of claim 31, wherein the communications adapter is one of a wireless communications adapter and a wired communications adapter.

33. The system of claim 31, wherein the communications adapter is one of a universal  
20 serial bus adapter, a Bluetooth communications adapter, a wireless adapter using 802.11b communications standard, and a wired Ethernet adapter.

34. The system of claim 30, wherein the receipt means includes means for identifying the at least one visible characteristic of the physical object.

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35. The system of claim 34, wherein the at least one visible characteristic includes one of a shape, a color, writing, and visible markings.

36. The system of claim 30, wherein the physical relationship is a given proximity to the first computing device.
37. The system of claim 30, wherein the first physical object is a container and  
5 wherein the physical relationship includes placing the first computing device within the first physical object.
38. The system of claim 37, wherein the container is a computer shelving unit.
- 10 39. The system of claim 30, wherein the first physical object is a second computing device and wherein the receipt means includes means for identifying a role of the second computing device.
40. The system of claim 30, wherein the first physical object includes a data storage  
15 unit and wherein the role information is stored in the data storage unit.
41. The system of claim 30, wherein the first physical object includes an output device.
- 20 42. The system of claim 41, wherein the output device is capable of altering the at least one visible characteristic.
43. The system of claim 41, wherein the first physical object receives status  
information from the first computing device and presents an indication of the status  
25 information using the output device.

44. The system of claim 30, wherein the first computing device assigns at least one role to at least one other computing device based on the role information.

45. The system of claim 30, wherein the association means and the role assignment means are embodied within the first computing device.

46. The system of claim 30, wherein at least one of the association means and the role assignment means is embodied within a second computing device.

47. A computer program product for assigning a role to a computing device in a network data processing system, the computer program product comprising:  
instructions, responsive to at least a first physical object being placed in a physical relationship with at least a first computing device, associating the first computing device with the first physical object, wherein the first physical object includes at least one visible characteristic, wherein the first physical object has role information associated therewith, and wherein the at least one visible characteristic is indicative of at least a first role associated with the first physical object;  
instructions for receiving, by the first computing device, the role information from the first physical object; and  
instructions, responsive to the role information being received, for assigning the first role to the first computing device based on the role information.